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AUTHOR Robertson, Boyd
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ABSTRACT

Gaelic is a minority language in Scotland. Gaelic speakers tend to be older and concentrated in the Western Highlands and Islands and some urban centers. Gaelic is used mainly in craft work and with friends and community members at prayer meetings, stores, post offices, and social events. Gaelic has no official status and limited legal protection. Its only official status is in the field of local administration. Broadcasting is one of the main contributors to the decline of the language, bringing English language into Gaelic-speaking homes. The government's Gaelic television fund has enabled increased broadcasting of Gaelic programs, though there is very little Gaelic in the print media. Gaelic activity in the arts is very strong and contributes significantly to the Scottish economy. Provision is made for Gaelic in all sectors of education, as a subject of study and a medium of instruction. The use of Gaelic as a medium was officially sanctioned in 1975, when a bilingual education project was launched. Gaelic-medium study is most comprehensive at Sabhal Mor Ostaig college. Official recognition of Gaelic by the state is crucial to halting the long-term decline of the language. (Contains 17 references.) (SM)

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Gaelic in Scotland at the dawn of the New Millennium

Abstract

by Boyd Robertson

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Gaelic in Scotland at the dawn of the New Millennium

Abstract

Gaelic is very much a minority language in Scotland with only 1.4% of the population (65,978) able to speak the language. Gaelic speakers are concentrated in the Western Highlands and Islands and in some urban centres such as Glasgow, Edinburgh and Inverness. The Gaelic-speaking population is heavily weighted towards the older age groups and research shows sharp intergenerational decline of language abilities and use. Research into the use of Gaelic and English in community life indicates that Gaelic is used mostly in croft work, with friends and neighbours and with local community figures. It is also used extensively in prayer meetings and in local shopping, at the post office and at social events. Gaelic is at its weakest in the work place, in dealings with officialdom and in personal letter-writing.

The language has no official status and only a limited degree of legal protection. It is only in the field of local administration that Gaelic enjoys a measure of official status and even then, it is confined to one local authority area, the Western isles. Provision for Gaelic in public life is ad hoc and sporadic. Administration of the Health Service, for instance, is conducted almost exclusively through the medium of English and extension of road signs is subject to Government approval. The absence of any coherent national policy on Gaelic convinced language agencies that legislation was required. The main language agency, Comunn na Gàidhlig, has led a campaign to win "secure status" for the language and has persuaded the ruling coalition in the new Scottish Parliament to give a commitment to introduce legislation on the language in the next parliamentary session.

The creation by the Government of a Gaelic Television Fund in 1990 enabled an additional 200 hours of Gaelic programmes to be broadcast annually. An average of 6 hours of Gaelic television programmes are shown each week but these are spread over four channels and there is no sense of a coherent service. The scheduling of the programmes is erratic and many are shown at unsocial hours. Gaelic radio offers a more comprehensive service, with 45 hours broadcast each week. Provision for Gaelic in the print media is much weaker than in the broadcast media, with only one national newspaper featuring Gaelic on a regular basis. Several attempts have been made to establish a Gaelic newspaper but none has survived for long. Publishing in Gaelic is very limited in scale, with around forty-five new titles per year. Only three Gaelic publishers employ full-time staff and all three are small outfits which run operations on the margins of viability.

One of the most buoyant sectors of Gaelic activity is the arts field and research has found that the Gaelic arts contribute over £10m annually to the Scottish economy. A particularly successful artistic endeavour has been the feisean movement. These local community festivals offer young people tuition in various Gaelic art forms. The main showcase for Gaelic culture is the National Mod, held annually in a different venue.

In the last 10-15 years, there has been a growing realisation that the language and culture could have economic significance for the Highlands and Islands. Both private and public sectors have begun to exploit the potential of markets such as cultural tourism and electronic and technological forms of industry are now enabling exiled Gaels to return to live and work in their home areas.

Provision is made for Gaelic in all sectors of education - as a subject of study and as a medium of instruction. Gaelic is offered as a subject in 40 of the 389 secondary schools in Scotland and separate courses and examinations are offered for fluent speakers and learners.

The use of Gaelic as a medium was not officially sanctioned until 1975, when a bilingual education project was launched in the Outer Hebrides. This was taken a stage further in 1985, with the opening of Gaelic-medium units in two primary schools in Glasgow and Inverness. The success of these units, and of pre-school playgroups, has led to a mushrooming of this form of provision. The first dedicated Gaelic-medium school in Scotland opened in Glasgow in 1999 and five primary schools in the Western Isles have now been designated Gaelic schools. Development in secondary schools has not kept pace with primary but 13 schools offer some form of Gaelic-medium curriculum.

Deployment of the language as a medium is perhaps at its most comprehensive in one further education college, Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, a Gaelic College founded in Skye in 1973. The College, which is now an integral part of the University of the Highlands and Islands Project, offers a range of full-time courses such as Broadcasting, Business Studies and ICT. It is also possible to study Gaelic at three of the older established universities.

Bleak as the prospects for the language might appear from the statistical perspective, there is cautious optimism in the Gaelic community that the long-term decline can be halted. A vital factor in securing the future of the language will be the granting of official recognition by the State.

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Gaelic in Scotland
at the dawn of a new millennium

The end of the second millennium has seen major constitutional reform in the United Kingdom with devolution of government from London to Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast and the restoration of a parliament in Scotland for the first time since the Union of the Parliaments of England and Scotland in 1707. The new Scottish Parliament, inaugurated in July 1999, has conferred on Scotland a substantial degree of autonomy including legislative and fiscal powers in the fields of education, health, industry, transport, the environment, agriculture and fisheries and the law.

The debate on devolution and the advent of the Parliament revived interest in questions of national identity and focussed attention on distinctive elements of Scottish culture. Language is an intrinsic part of culture and, in Scotland, the Gaelic language has played a fundamental part in the creation of the nation's culture and identity. The very name Scotland derives from the Gaelic-speaking immigrants from Ireland who settled in the western coastal areas from the fourth century AD and many of the badges of Scottish identity, eg tartans, bagpipes, whisky and Mac surnames, have their origins in Gaelic culture.

Demographic status

Gaelic, a close relative of Irish and more distant relative of Welsh, is the longest-established of Scotland's languages but it is spoken by fewer than 3 in every 200 Scots. A mere 1.4% of the Scottish population of just over 5,000,000 speak this regional language which was once spoken in virtually every part of Scotland and was, for a time at the beginning of the second millennium, the language of the Scottish Crown and Government.

The decline in Gaelic from a national language spoken throughout the country to a minority language confined largely to peripheral areas of the Western seaboard was, in part, due to a conscious effort by central government to subdue the independent-minded and, sometimes, rebellious Highlands and Islands which were the stronghold of the language. Gaelic speakers, at times, suffered outright persecution and deliberate attempts were made to extirpate the language. The status of the language was also eroded by anglicising influences from the south, by centuries of emigration and migration and by discriminatory policies. These factors all contributed to a lack of self-confidence amongst the population and, in some cases, a negative perception of the value of the language amongst Gaelic speakers.

The fall in the number of Gaelic speakers is clearly demonstrated by the census figures for the period 1881-1991 shown in the following table:-

Table 1

CENSUSES 1881 - 1991

Census	Number of Gaelic speakers	% of population	Number of Gaelic only speakers	% of population
1881	231,594	6.2		
1891	210,677	5.2	43,738	1.1
1901	202,700	4.5	28,106	0.6
1911	183,998	3.9	18,400	0.4
1921	148,950	3.3	9,829	0.2
1931	129,419	2.8	6,716	0.1
1951	93,269	1.8	2,178	0.04
1961	80,004	1.5	974	0.01
1971	88,415	1.7	477	0.009
1981	82,620	1.6	-	-
1991	65,978	1.4	-	-

The Gaelic-speaking population of Scotland is to be found mostly in the Western Isles and on the western fringes of the Highland mainland but there are also significant pockets of Gaelic speakers in urban centres such as Glasgow, Edinburgh and Inverness. Of the 32 local authority areas in Scotland, only 11 have more than 1,000 Gaelic speakers. These authorities are identified in Table 2:-

Table 2

GAELIC SPEAKERS IN LOCAL AUTHORITY AREA

Local Authority	No. of Gaelic Speakers over 3 years	% of population
Comhairle nan Eilean Siar	19,546	68.42
Highland	14,713	7.49
Glasgow	6,018	1.03
Argyll & Bute	4,880	5.51
Edinburgh	3,089	0.76
Fife	1,477	0.45
Perth & Kinross	1,392	1.17
South Lanarkshire	1,228	0.52
Aberdeen	1,134	0.57
North Lanarkshire	1,069	0.34
East Dunbartonshire	1,017	0.96

The areas with the highest density of Gaelic speakers are shown in Appendix 1. The most strongly Gaelic-speaking communities are to be found in the islands of the Outer Hebrides and Skye, particularly in the more rural areas. 68% of the population of the Outer Hebrides was Gaelic-speaking in 1991 but the Isle of Skye was no longer predominantly Gaelic-speaking, having dropped to 47%.

An analysis of the age and sex structure of the Gaelic-speaking population shows that the population is skewed towards the older age groups and that women outnumber men by 5%. 25% of Gaelic speakers are aged 65 or over while only 11% are aged 3-15. More than half (52%) of Gaelic speakers are aged 45 or over. The age profile of the Gaelic-speaking population in 1991 makes it clear that the downward spiral is set to continue and can only be arrested by very substantial rises in the numbers of young children speaking Gaelic and a large influx of learners.

Research conducted over the last two decades shows "sharp inter-generational decline of language abilities and use." (MacKinnon, 1997) In particular, a language maintenance and viability survey conducted in the Western Isles in 1986-88, and a similar survey conducted in 1994-95, as part of the Euromosaic Project, revealed "substantial slippage" over the 9 years interval and also "an even steeper intergenerational decline between subjects' grandparents and their own children." (MacKinnon, 1997) These findings were corroborated by 1991 Census data which showed that in homes in which both parents spoke Gaelic, only 73% of children were Gaelic-speaking. In the comparable situation in Wales, 94% of the children could speak Welsh. In homes in which one parent spoke Gaelic, only 14% of the children spoke the language, a percentage which contrasts sharply with 78% of Welsh-speaking children in the same category. Where the lone parent spoke Gaelic, the transmission rate to children was 38%. The corresponding Welsh figure was 79%. (MacKinnon, 1999) A further worrying finding of the Euromosaic survey was that only a very small proportion of the children of Gaelic-speaking respondents speak Gaelic to one another. The implications of these findings for the future of the language are dire. Indeed, MacKinnon warns "The prospects are of the language rapidly on its way to extinction as a community vernacular within the next couple of decades or so." (MacKinnon, 1997)

Sociolinguistic status

The research surveys referred to above also investigated the extent of use of Gaelic and English in community life. Gaelic was used most extensively in croft work and in prayer meetings and was also used substantially at the post office, social events and in local shopping. Exchanges with friends and neighbours were very strongly Gaelic and the language was also used frequently in exchanges with the local councillor, nurse, minister or priest and child's teacher. The weakest domains for Gaelic were dealings with officialdom and the workplace.

MacKinnon identified factors such as a general English work culture, anglicised administrative centres and a substantial number of monoglot staff as contributing to the dominance of English in the work situation. In the communications media, the survey showed that Gaelic television and radio were popular, print media less so and personal letter-writing was conducted almost entirely in English. The 1994-95 research indicated that religion is not as strongly Gaelic a domain as it was earlier and MacKinnon wondered whether any other domain might replace it as "a bulwark" for the language. (MacKinnon, 1999)

Legal status

Gaelic has no official status within the United Kingdom or within Scotland but the language does have a limited degree of legal protection. The authors of a Comunn na Gàidhlig (CNAG) report on the status of the language contend that "such protection as does exist has been given on a piecemeal basis and is inadequate, given the legitimate needs of the linguistic community and the importance of the language to the continuing development of Scotland's national identity." (Comunn na Gàidhlig, 1997)

The Education (Scotland) Act of 1872 which set up a national system of state education made no provision for Gaelic education. After a campaign led by the main Gaelic language body of that period, An Comunn Gaidhealach, a clause was added to the 1918 revision of the 1872 Act. This clause has been incorporated in subsequent Acts including the current Education (Scotland) Act of 1980 which places an obligation on education authorities to make provision for "the teaching of Gaelic in Gaelic-speaking areas." Both of these terms are ambiguous and offer little support to parents seeking Gaelic-medium education provision for their children.

A much more meaningful item of legislation in respect of Gaelic education was the 1986 Grants for Gaelic Language Education (Scotland) Regulations which made provision for a Scheme of Specific Grants for Gaelic education. This Scheme enables local authorities to bid for 75% funding for new projects and initiatives and it has been a major catalyst for the expansion of Gaelic education in recent years.

The Broadcasting Act of 1990 made significant provision for Gaelic with the creation of a Gaelic Television Committee, Comataidh Telebhisein Gàidhlig, to administer a fund called The Gaelic Television Fund. The Broadcasting Act of 1996 extended the Committee's remit to include radio and the Committee's name was changed to the Gaelic Broadcasting Committee, Comataidh Craolaidh Gàidhlig.

It is only in the field of local administration that Gaelic enjoys a measure of official status and even that is confined to one local authority area, the Western Isles. A major reorganisation of local government in Scotland in 1974 led to the creation of Comhairle nan Eilean, the Western Isles Islands Council. This was a very significant event in that it brought public administration home to the Islands from urban and anglicised East Coast mainland centres in Dingwall and Inverness. One of the first acts of the new Council was the adoption of a bilingual policy. This was quickly followed by a bilingual education policy and a number of other significant initiatives on behalf of the language. After an initial highly proactive phase in which the bilingual policy was actively applied in Council meetings and business, it has not been as assiduously or widely implemented as was originally envisaged.

Official recognition

In 1996, the leading Gaelic language agency, CNAG, made the issue of official recognition and legal status for the language a top priority and a Working Group was set up to examine the issues involved and to bring forward recommendations regarding the general principles which should inform legislation. The Group's recommendations, published in March 1997, were fully endorsed by an extensive consultation process in the Gaelic community. The deliberations of the Working Group were subsequently translated into a Draft brief for a Gaelic Language Act which was submitted to the First Minister of the Scottish Parliament in June 1999.

The Group concluded that "the only way in which meaningful protection - secure status - can be given to Gaelic is the passage of specific legislation which will impose certain binding standards on politicians and public servants" and they called on the Scottish Parliament to pass a Gaelic Language Act which would establish "a basic principle of equal validity for Gaelic and English in Scotland, along the lines of the recognition given to Welsh by virtue of the Welsh Language Act 1993." There has already been progress with some of the proposals relating to the Parliament itself with the appointment of a Gaelic Officer and the use of bilingual signs throughout the parliamentary chambers. Gaelic has also already been used in debates and in committee proceedings of the Parliament. The Group further proposed that a Parliamentary Standing Committee on Gaelic be set up to advise the Minister with responsibility for Gaelic.

The Draft brief recommends that all government and quasi-governmental bodies should be required to develop Gaelic policies and appoint a Gaelic Officer to design and implement policies. In the legal context, it is recommended that "persons appearing before all courts of general jurisdiction, administrative tribunals and other judicial or quasi-judicial bodies be entitled to both present cases and give evidence through the medium of Gaelic where they so choose" and that any document in Gaelic should have full legal force and validity for all purposes.

Education and broadcasting, non-discrimination and enforcement are the other key areas covered by these proposals. In education, the report argues for statutory provision to be put in place which would place a requirement on local authorities to make Gaelic-medium school education available where "reasonable demand" exists. Reasonable demand is defined as demand made on behalf of 5 or more pupils.

The precise nature of the Government's response to the Draft brief for a Gaelic Language Act is not yet known but the Scottish Executive has given a commitment to include legislation on Gaelic in its legislative programme for the next parliamentary session and the Minister for Gaelic announced in June 1999 that working to achieve secure status will be top of the Executive's agenda for Gaelic. The Labour Government has also reversed the previous Government's policy by agreeing to sign the Council of Europe Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.

Broadcasting

Broadcasting, and television in particular, have been identified by a leading Gaelic broadcaster as one of the main contributors to the decline of the language (MacPherson, 1999). MacPherson claims that the influence of broadcasting on Gaelic has been "both pervasive and pernicious." Few would dispute his assertion that "Broadcasting, with its high-status role in society, disseminates the majority language to the detriment of the minority language. It has not only brought the English language into Gaelic-speaking homes but also anglified values and role models with which people can increasingly be identified, particularly young people."

MacPherson contends that broadcasting can have a positive influence on intergenerational transmission in the minority language in a similar way to the advantages it confers on transmission in majority languages and he argues that broadcasting is a necessity, not an optional extra or a luxury, in terms of language development.

A similar conclusion was reached by a review of Gaelic broadcasting commissioned by CNAG in 1988. The review concluded that the failure to provide an adequate television service contrasted sharply with positive developments in other fields such as education, the arts and local government and regarded a television service as essential for the future viability of the language. A highly professional lobbying campaign conducted by CNAG resulted in the inclusion of two important measures in respect of Gaelic in the 1990 Broadcasting Act. A Gaelic Television Fund was created and a Gaelic Television Committee was set up to administer the Fund and to enable an additional 200 hours of Gaelic programming to be broadcast annually.

The significance of this measure is illustrated by the increase in the hours of Gaelic broadcast on television from 102 in 1988 to 337 in 1998. The Government allocated £9.5 million per annum to the Gaelic Television Fund when it became operational in 1992 and the expectation was that this would rise incrementally annually. This has not happened. The Labour Party made education a key issue in the 1997 Election and, on taking office, increased the Gaelic education budget by £1m but did so by transferring the money from broadcasting. Under the 1996 Broadcasting Act, radio was brought within the remit of the Committee but no significant additional funding was provided for this redesignated Gaelic Broadcasting Committee.

Gaelic television programmes are not concentrated on one channel as in Wales or Ireland and there is no sense of a coherent service. The scheduling of programmes by the Independent Television companies is a bone of contention between the viewers, the Gaelic Broadcasting Committee and the broadcasters. Very few programmes are shown at peak hours and several are transmitted during the night.

Gaelic radio offers the community a much more comprehensive service than does television. The BBC broadcasts 45 hours of Gaelic programming each week, mainly in two blocks from 7.30 am to 12 noon and from 5 pm to 7.30 pm on weekdays. Programmes can be received by listeners in most parts of Scotland and have a high penetration in the Gaelic community. Some community stations carry Gaelic programming but there is little Gaelic broadcasting on independent radio.

Printed Media

Provision for Gaelic in the print media is much weaker than in the broadcast media. Only one national newspaper features Gaelic on a regular basis while another carries a weekly Gaelic column. Various attempts have been made over the years to establish a Gaelic newspaper but none of these has survived for long. A fresh attempt was made in 1997 with the launch of An Gaidheal Ur, a monthly title distributed in a local weekly newspaper.

Gaelic features regularly in the columns of the two main local weekly papers for the Outer Hebrides and Skye and there are regular Gaelic columns in two other local weeklies. Community newspapers, normally published on a monthly basis, include some Gaelic items. The longest-established extant Gaelic publication is a quarterly literary magazine, Gairm, founded in 1952.

Publishing

The state of Gaelic publishing can be gauged by the fact that, in a good year, only 45 new titles are published. Around half of these titles are produced for use in schools.

Only three Gaelic publishers employ full-time staff. All three outfits run operations on the margins of viability and rely heavily on financial support given by The Gaelic Books Council, Comhairle nan Leabhraichean. There are also a number of small publishers but these tend to be part-time operations, often individual initiatives and cottage industries. The market for Gaelic books is small and unit production costs arising from low print runs are much higher than for similar English language publications. Limited literacy amongst the older generations caused by a lack of schooling in the mother tongue is one of the factors that restricts the potential readership.

The Arts

One of the most buoyant sectors of Gaelic activity in recent years has been the arts field and research has shown that Gaelic arts contribute over £10 million annually to the Scottish economy. Gaelic poets, bands and folk singers have won international acclaim in their art forms and have played a significant part in elevating the status of the Gaelic arts at home and abroad.

For many years, the main vehicles for the transmission of music and song were ceilidhs (concerts) and mods. Mods are principally competitive music festivals, broadly equivalent to the Welsh Eisteddfod and the Oireachtas of Ireland. The main showcase for Gaelic culture has traditionally been the National Mod held in October each year in a different location. The Mod is a major cultural event in the Scottish calendar and incorporates music, song, drama and linguistic and literary competitions in its week-long programme.

Fresh impetus was given to the Gaelic arts with the setting up, in 1987, of a National Gaelic Arts Project. The Project's remit was to promote and co-ordinate Gaelic arts development and it has given the Gaelic arts greater professionalism and a higher public profile. The audience for Gaelic arts has been considerably expanded through events organised by the National Gaelic Arts Agency (NGAA), as it is now called, and through the incorporation of Gaelic arts within major events such as the annual Edinburgh International Festival and Glasgow's Celtic Connections Festival.

The Arts Agency has done much to develop Gaelic drama including the formation of a touring Gaelic theatre company, Tosg. It has also been instrumental in initiating projects such as the Ceòlas Summer School in South Uist. Ceòlas offers master classes in Gaelic song, fiddle, pipes and dance and is very much a community-based project. Its success was recognised by the 1999 Scottish Tourist Board Thistle Award for cultural tourism.

One of the most successful artistic endeavours in the past two decades has been the fèisean movement. Fèisean are local community festivals which offer young people tuition in various Gaelic art forms including Hebridean dancing, step-dancing, drama, traditional arts and crafts, Gaelic song, the sport of shinty and traditional Highland instruments such as the bagpipe, harp and fiddle. The first fèis was held in Barra in 1981 and there are now over thirty such festivals held in different parts of Scotland. A national organisation, Fèisean nan Gaidheal, co-ordinates and promotes fèisean activity. The typical fèis lasts for a week and the more successful fèisean have follow-up tuition programmes at various times of the year. Over 3,500 young people attend these fèisean annually and they provide many youngsters with their first experience of the language and culture. While the fèisean have undoubtedly been a great success culturally, the charge is levelled that they have not contributed as strongly to linguistic regeneration except in the few instances where a fèis operates entirely through the medium of Gaelic.

One of the main aims of the fèisean movement is to give access to the culture and to transmit the traditional arts. This is also the philosophy underlying the Dualchas Project, which is designed to bring together and digitise the archives of folk tradition and song currently held by institutions such as the BBC and The School of Scottish Studies in Edinburgh University.

Socio-economic Development

Agriculture, fishing and production of Harris tweed have traditionally been the mainstays of the economy of the Gaelic-speaking areas and tourism has made an increasingly important contribution in the post-war years. These industries are susceptible to the vagaries of the market-place and of the climate and few people gain employment wholly from one sector. Smallholdings, known as crofts, are the basic unit of agriculture in the Western Highlands and Islands. The typical croft cannot, of itself, offer families the kind of income required today and it is thus very common to find crofting families also engaged in fishing, weaving, tourism and other industries and occupations.

Gaelic has traditionally been the main vehicle of communication used by crofters, fishermen and weavers and the language has a rich vocabulary associated with each. The more commercial aspects of these industries tend to be conducted in English and tourism, by its very

nature, uses the main common denominator. There is no research evidence as yet as to the level of Gaelic usage in the newer industries such as fish-farming, construction, electronics and information and communication technology (ICT) but each is making a vital contribution in sustaining the economy of Gaelic communities. Indeed, some of these, particularly ICT, are enabling exiled Gaels to return to live and work in their home areas.

Gaelic language development was, in the past, largely divorced from socio-economic development. That has changed in the last ten to fifteen years and there is now a keener awareness of the inter-relationship between the two. One of the first people to recognise this inter-dependence was Sir Iain Noble, a merchant banker who acquired a large estate in the Isle of Skye. The estate was in a run-down condition and the local economy was at a low ebb but Noble recognised its potential and saw Gaelic as an engine of regeneration.

Noble set up a bilingual estate company, Fearann Eilean Iarmain, which spawned developments in fishing, tourism, knitwear and whisky production and Gaelic became a requirement for employment in the estate's hotel, shop, offices etc. He was also instrumental in establishing a Gaelic College in a derelict barn on his estate. This has now grown into the highly successful Sabhal Mòr Ostaig which is one of the main employers in the south of Skye. Taken together, Noble's language-based entrepreneurial initiatives have been the main reason for the rejuvenation of the economy in that part of the island.

The realisation that the language and culture could have economic significance for the Highlands and Islands has gradually set in and both the private and the public sector are now beginning to exploit the potential of markets such as cultural tourism. This manifests itself in, for example, the increasing adoption of Gaelic and bilingual signage and business nomenclature, Gaelic holidays, cultural brochures and courses and the establishment of artistic, cultural and interpretative centres.

Educational Status

Provision is made for Gaelic in all sectors of education. There are two broad strands of provision - Gaelic as a subject of study and Gaelic as a medium of instruction. As previously indicated, the 1872 Act which set up a national system of state schools in Scotland overlooked the needs of Gaelic speakers, including the many who at that time could not speak any other language. When a concession to Gaelic education was wrung from the Government in 1918, the Act specified only the teaching of Gaelic, not teaching in Gaelic. Thus was set in train a system of Gaelic subject teaching which was to prevail for many decades.

Gaelic as subject of study

Most of the formal teaching of the subject took place in secondary school where study of the language and literature led to national certificate examinations in the subject. Even in classes of fluent speakers, most of the teaching was conducted through the medium of English. In 1965, separate courses and examinations were introduced for fluent speakers and learners. Provision for learners of Gaelic was thus brought into line with provision for learners of foreign languages.

Gaelic is offered as a subject in 40 of the 389 secondary schools in Scotland. The vast majority of these are located in the Highlands and Islands and access to learning the language at secondary school is denied to children in the cities and many other parts of the country. Some 700 follow fluent speakers' courses, while around 2,200 take learners courses in Secondary.

Teaching of Gaelic in primary schools has been sporadic and less systematic. Provision for fluent speakers tends to be governed by local circumstances and is often the result of individual initiative. Outwith the Gaelic-speaking areas, tuition in Gaelic for learners has been provided largely by itinerant teachers who were often asked to cover many schools in a geographically widespread area. The amount of contact time with pupils was very limited and varied greatly from school to school. A new approach based on a Modern Languages model in which classroom teachers receive training in the target language to enable them to provide tuition on a regular basis has been introduced by Highland Regional Council.

The bilingual approach

The use of Gaelic as a medium of instruc... was not officially sanctioned until 1975 when the newly constituted local authority for the Outer Hebrides, Comhairle nan Eilean, launched the Bilingual Education Project. The authority received Government backing for this radical departure from previous practice and the Scottish Office Education Department jointly funded the first two phases of the project. The project sought to build on the home language of the majority of pupils and both Gaelic and English were used as languages of instruction from the beginning of primary school.

There was a favourable parental response to the project in its early years but, by the early 1980s, concern was being expressed about the level of fluency in Gaelic being attained by pupils in some schools after several years of bilingual schooling. Parents also voiced dissatisfaction with the progress being made by certain schools in implementing the bilingual model. A similar bilingual scheme was piloted in 1978 in 5 Skye schools by Highland Regional Council and was eventually extended to all primary schools on the island..

Doubts about the ability of bilingual models to deliver fluency in Gaelic, comparable to that in English, and a growing awareness of the extent of language erosion amongst children brought parents, educationalists and language activists to the realisation that a different approach was required. Developments in other minority language communities were studied and it became apparent that use of the minority language as the medium of education had to be maximised to ensure maintenance and transmission of the language. By this time, a number of Gaelic pre-school playgroups had been set up and had demonstrated the viability of the Gaelic-medium method. Parents were convinced that this was the way forward and that the Gaelic-medium approach should be continued in primary school.

Gaelic-medium education in Primary Schools

1985 saw the beginning of Gaelic-medium education in the primary sector with the opening of units in schools in Glasgow and Inverness. The success of these units and the rapid growth in playgroups, fostered by a national association, Comhairle nan Sgoiltean Araich, fuelled demand for similar units in other areas. The rate of growth has been such that, in session 1999-2000, there were 59 schools and 1835 pupils engaged in Gaelic-medium primary school education. Most schools with Gaelic-medium provision are in the Highlands and Islands but there are several in non-Gaelic-speaking areas such as Aberdeen, Edinburgh and Perth. 25% of primary pupils in the Western Isles receive their education through the medium of Gaelic and English-medium education is the exception in some island schools. Comhairle nan Eilean Siar has responded to this situation by designating five of its primary schools as Gaelic schools. Another measure of the advances made in Gaelic-medium education was the opening in September 1999 of the first dedicated Gaelic-medium school in Scotland, in Glasgow.

In virtually all Gaelic-medium classes, there is a mix of fluent speakers and learners. The proportions vary depending on the type of community the school serves. In rural, island schools, many of the pupils come from Gaelic-speaking homes but this is seldom the case in urban, mainland schools. Research shows that parents choose Gaelic-medium education for reasons such as maintenance and development of the mother tongue, restoration to a family of a language that has skipped a generation or two, acquisition of a second language, the perceived advantages of bilingualism and access to Gaelic culture and heritage.

The Gaelic-medium curriculum follows the National Guidelines on Gaelic for the ages 5-14. The Guidelines specify that Gaelic-medium education should aim "to bring pupils to the stage of broadly equal competence in Gaelic and English, in all skills, by the end of Primary 7." Research commissioned by the Government concluded that "pupils receiving Gaelic-medium primary education, whether or not Gaelic was the language of their home, were not being disadvantaged in comparison with children educated in English. In many though not all instances, they out-performed English-medium pupils and, in addition, gained the advantage of having become proficient in two languages." (Johnstone, 1999) The research involved 34 schools and comparisons were made with pupils receiving English-medium education in the same schools, in other schools, in the same authority and nationally. Attainments in English, Gaelic, Maths and Science were studied and analysed and one of the most significant findings

was that pupils educated through the medium of Gaelic "did better than their English-medium counterparts in English."

Gaelic-medium education in Secondary Schools

The use of Gaelic as a medium of education in secondary schools was pioneered in 1983 in two schools in Lewis. This pilot project, involving the teaching of social subjects through Gaelic, was an extension of the Council's then primary school bilingual education programme. The pilot was deemed a success and these two schools continued to teach History and Geography in Gaelic.

Development of Gaelic-medium education in other parts of the country resulted from the establishment of primary provision and the need to provide continuity of experience for pupils transferring from primary to secondary. There are now 13 secondary schools which offer some form of Gaelic-medium curriculum. History is the subject most widely available through the medium of Gaelic, while Geography, Personal and Social Education, Mathematics, Science, Home Economics, Technical Education and Art are also taught in Gaelic in one or more of the schools. Candidates may elect to sit Gaelic versions of national Standard Grade Examinations in History, Geography and Maths. It is hoped that other subjects will be added to the examination options as the system develops and that Gaelic versions of Higher examinations will also be made available.

Development Facilitation

The development of Gaelic-medium education has been greatly facilitated by the Scheme of Specific Grants for Gaelic education, initiated by the Government in 1986. Under this scheme, local authorities submit proposals to SEED and receive 75% funding for approved projects. Grants are only awarded for new or additional provision and authorities are expected to meet the full costs of developments after three years. The Government has committed £2.6m funding to the scheme in 1999-2000. Authorities can bid for funding on an individual or collective basis but they are expected to allocate a proportion of total funding to collaborative ventures. An inter-authority network has been formed to help co-ordinate action by local authorities and this has helped to bring about a major improvement in the production of teaching and learning materials. The establishment of a Gaelic National Resource Centre in Lewis in 1999 should also go some way to addressing the resource requirements in particular curricular areas.

One of the factors inhibiting further growth in Gaelic-medium schooling is the shortage of Gaelic-medium teachers. Recruitment drives have helped to reduce the gap between supply and demand but there is still an insufficient number of trained personnel to sustain, let alone expand, the Gaelic-medium service. There is also concern and dissatisfaction about the training currently provided. Newly-qualified teachers feel inadequately prepared for the additional demands and specialised requirements of the Gaelic-medium classroom. Recommendations in a recent report from the General Teaching Council for Scotland should, if fully implemented and adequately resourced, considerably improve the initial training of Gaelic-medium teachers.

The time children spend in school is only a fraction of the time spent in the home and the community and the contribution of these domains to the education of the child is being recognised and addressed increasingly. Reinforcement of the language beyond the school is regarded as a vital part of the Gaelic-medium strategy, especially for children from non Gaelic-speaking backgrounds, and a nationwide network of Gaelic clubs has been set up by CNAG. Over 1,500 children between the ages of 5 and 12 attend forty, or so, Sradagan clubs. Local authorities throughout Scotland arrange evening classes for parents who wish to learn Gaelic and want to assist, and keep in step with, the linguistic progress of their children. The growth of local history societies, comainn eachdraidh, which gather and collate local material and make it available to the general public and to schools for local studies and projects has contributed to a strengthening of school and community interaction in recent years.

Pre-school and Post-school education

The use of Gaelic as a medium of education has developed to such an extent that it is now possible, depending on where you live, to be educated in Gaelic from playgroup to post-graduate level. Around 1800 children take advantage of the parent and toddler groups and playgroups laid on by the Gaelic Preschool Council and the last two years have seen a dramatic growth in nursery school provision. This has been stimulated by a national Government drive to expand nursery education. It is Government policy that Gaelic nursery units are based in, or closely associated with, primary school Gaelic-medium classes.

After leaving the school sector, young people can elect to continue with Gaelic-medium education in the tertiary sector. Indeed, the use of Gaelic as a medium of instruction is at its most comprehensive in one further education college. Sabhal Mòr Ostaig was founded in 1973 as a Gaelic College in Sleat in Skye. From modest beginnings as a college offering short courses in Gaelic language and culture, it has grown into a fully-fledged college and an integral part of the University of the Highlands and Islands Project (UHIP). Sabhal Mòr today offers national qualifications and postgraduate courses in Business Studies, Information Technology, Management, Communications, Broadcasting and the Arts. All these courses, and others in Gaelic Language and Gaidhealtachd Studies, are delivered and assessed in Gaelic.

Sabhal Mòr is one of thirteen colleges and institutions participating in UHIP, which hopes to win university status for the federal, collegiate institution by 2004. It is envisaged that UHI will reflect the character and culture of the region and give Gaelic a higher profile and an enhanced role in higher education as a specialist subject of study and as a medium of learning and assessment. Students wishing to study Gaelic at an established university can choose between Aberdeen, Edinburgh and Glasgow, each of which has a Celtic Department. These departments offer a range of undergraduate courses in Gaelic and Celtic Studies and students can take an Honours degree in Celtic or a joint Honours in Celtic and another subject. Some Celtic Studies classes are taught in Gaelic but the language is not yet deployed as a medium in other subject areas. Provision is made for students wishing to learn the language and Celtic Civilisation classes cater for those with an interest in cultural heritage. Postgraduate study opportunities are also available in the discipline. The University of Strathclyde has, following the merger with Jordanhill College, established Gaelic classes for undergraduates.

Policy Development

Impressive though the development of Gaelic-medium education has been over the last fifteen years, members of an Education Action Group set up by CNAG found that provision made by local authorities varied considerably in terms of the level of service and of supportive infrastructure. It was felt to be over-dependent on political goodwill and, therefore, vulnerable to political and administrative change.

The Group recommended that a national committee on Gaelic education be established by the Government to advise on all aspects of provision and funding and asked that the language be given the same kind of recognition that is afforded to Welsh in Wales in order to give Gaelic education a secure status. These recommendations were accepted by CNAG and they form key elements of a paper, A National Policy for Gaelic Education, submitted to the Government in 1997. There has been progress on some of the more detailed proposals made in this document but the main recommendations are the subject of ongoing negotiations between CNAG and the Scottish Executive in the wider context of deliberations on legislative action on secure status.

Conclusions

Census figures show that there has been a relentless fall in the number of Gaelic speakers over the past century and an analysis of the age profile of the Gaelic-speaking population suggests that this downward spiral is set to continue for some time yet. Research data on the intergenerational rates of transmission of the language confirms this projection.

Bleak as the prospects might appear from the statistical perspective, there is cautious optimism in the Gaelic community that the long-term decline can be halted and, indeed, reversed. This

positive outlook is based on the turnaround in the fortunes of the language in the last 40, or so, years. There has been a distinct improvement in attitudes to the language and culture, in provision made for Gaelic and in the commitment of Gaels to their language.

Negative and hostile attitudes still exist and are voiced periodically in the media but public opinion surveys indicate a broad measure of support for initiatives to support the language. A remarkable renaissance in Gaelic poetry in the middle part of the century was one of the main agents of change in public perception of, and attitude to, the language. This attitudinal shift has led to unprecedented interest in the language and its associated culture.

The flowering of Gaelic poetry did not just impact on the consciousness of non-Gaels. It also had a considerable influence on the mind set of the Gael. The poets instilled in their fellow Gaels a renewed pride in their culture and a greater self-esteem and self-belief and this validation of their culture was reinforced by subsequent events such as the foundation of the Gaelic College in Skye, the adoption of a bilingual policy in the Western Isles and the expansion in Gaelic television. All of this helped to galvanise the Gaelic-speaking community and produced an enhanced level of commitment to the language.

That sense of commitment has been nowhere more apparent than in the education sector where developments have resulted invariably from parental initiatives and grassroots action. The fact that there are now some 3,500 children aged 3-15 being educated through the medium of Gaelic testifies to the new-found will and tenacity of Gaelic-speaking parents and activists. But, for all that provision for the language has increased in education, broadcasting, the arts, public administration and the socio-economic sector, the fact remains that 1,500 children are required annually to replenish the pool of Gaelic speakers depleted by the demise of older speakers.

There are, however, grounds for optimism within the community itself and in the wider national context. A vital factor in securing the future of the language will be the granting of official recognition by the State. Political support for the language has never been stronger and the reconstituted Scottish Parliament has a splendid opportunity to demonstrate the benefits devolved government can confer in regard to matters of language, culture and heritage.

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